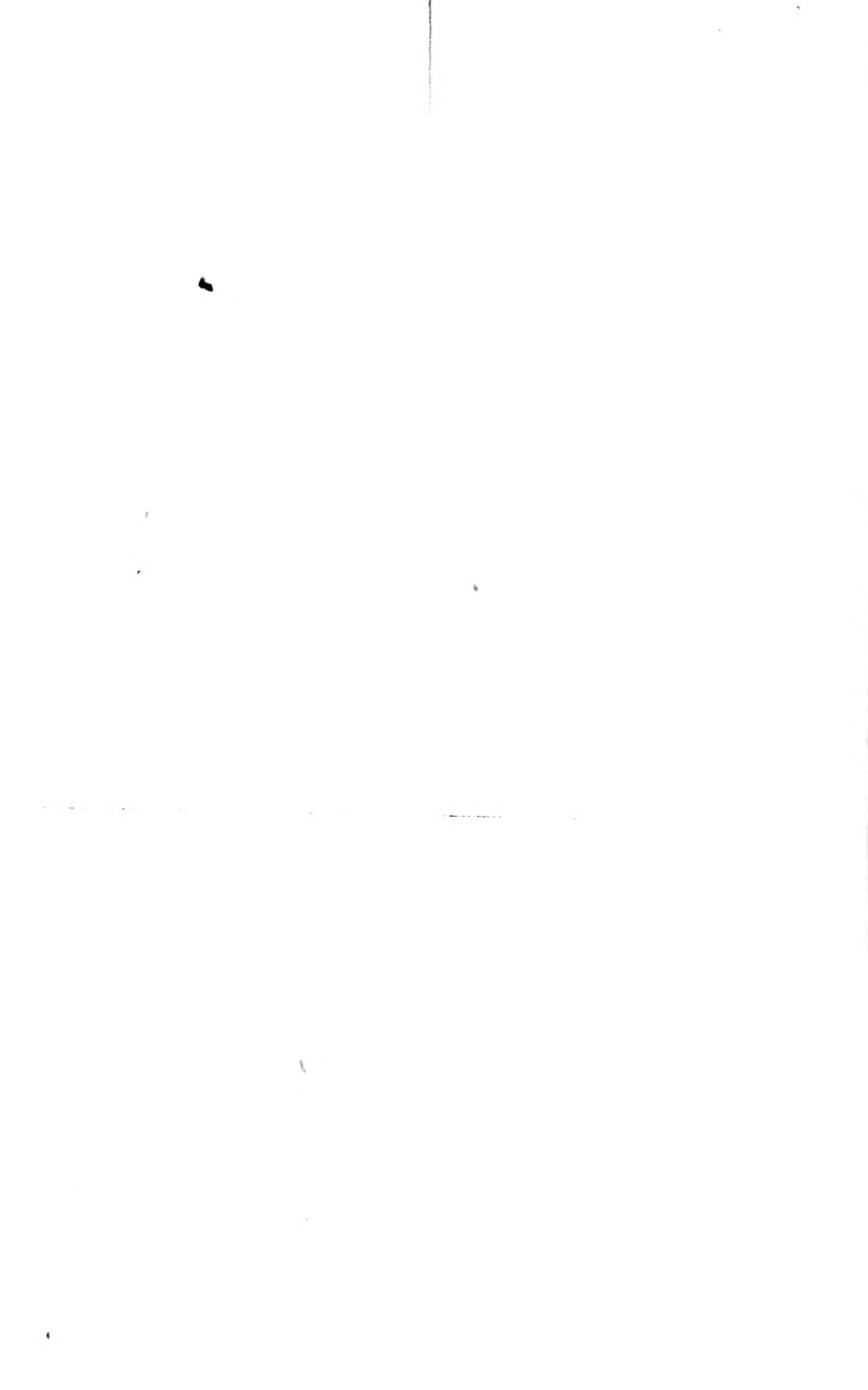


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# Letter on the Crisis.

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# LETTER ON THE CRISIS,

BY

## HON. ROBERT McCLELLAND.

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DETROIT, December 31, 1860.

HON. ROBERT McCLELLAND:

*Dear Sir:*—The undersigned are impressed with the conviction that a calamity, such as this country never saw, is impending over it—that it is being drifted into ruin by ultra men, South and North; that government and politicians alike failing, there is no hope of extrication by any power, after God, but that of the people themselves in their primary masses, moving of themselves and for themselves, and who need but to know the truth to devise the remedy.

We ask you, therefore, as a citizen universally known to the people of this State, and whose past relations to them and to the country at large, entitle your representations to weight and respectful consideration, to present to and for the public your views upon a crisis in the condition of our National affairs, the gravest in its aspect and consequences hitherto experienced in our history.

Disconnected from politics since your retirement from the national councils, we regard you as a conservative man, who can, in an exigency like this, execute the obligations of duty devolving

upon every patriotic citizen, uninfluenced by any political considerations whatever.

We are, truly,

Your friends and fellow citizens.

H. K. SANGER,	HENRY CHIPMAN,
F. BUHL,	HENRY L. CHIPMAN,
C. C. TROWBRIDGE,	E. N. WILLCOX,
JNO. WINDER,	A. D. FRASER,
C. HURLBUT,	D. F. DWIGHT,
A. H. DEY,	W. N. CARPENTER,
A. H. ROOD,	THEO. H. HINCHMAN,
R. N. RICE,	AUG. E. BISSELL,
B. L. WEBB,	L. W. TINKER,
GEO. BISSELL,	JAMES BURNS,
GUY F. HINCHMAN.	

DETROIT, January 2, 1861.

GENTLEMEN:

Thanking you for the kind terms in which your request for my views upon the impending crisis is communicated, I feel it to be my duty, under the circumstances, to promptly respond to it.

I have never, until recently, entertained any fear of the dissolution of the Union; but the danger is now so apparent, that it would manifest arrant recklessness not to admit it. The apathy of the people, and the general belief that the impending storm will blow over, without doing any serious harm, are lamentable. The stubborn fact boldly presents itself—instead of longer trying to deceive ourselves, it is the duty of every citizen to exert all his energies to prevent the sad catastrophe. This can only be done by combining the Union sentiment of the whole country. We never required more the patriotic and self-sacrificing spirit which inspired our ancestors in the achievement of our liberties.

The moderate men of all sections should be induced to act. Whenever the conservative element is thoroughly aroused—and to this the appeal should be made—such an adjustment of our difficulties will be effected as will forever remove the cause of con-

tention from our national councils, restore harmony, and insure the stability of our institutions.

Crimination and recrimination have been carried too far. As with neighbors, so with the States, we should endeavor to hide, and not expose, each other's faults. Reason and reflection upon facts as they really are, have not had their proper influence. Undoubtedly, both sections of the Union have been in the wrong, a mutual admission of which would tend more than anything else to promote a common redress of grievances and a reconciliation upon a lasting basis. The occasion demands that the people shall speak for themselves, and not through the ordinary channels, which, it is feared, have become too partisan in their character to be reliable.

How seldom do we bear in mind that when the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed, slavery was a domestic institution in every one of the Colonies; that it existed in all the States, except Massachusetts, when the constitution was adopted; that our present system of government never could have been established, if the slavery question had not been amicably adjusted; that the South is principally indebted to Great Britain and the commercial States of the North for their peculiar institution; that the African slave trade is now carried on, to a great extent, by the vessels and capital of the northern cities; and that history proves that we, of the Northwest, owe to the South not only the soil on which we live, but protection in our infancy against savage and foreign foes, by which alone we have been enabled to expand to our present magnificent proportions.

It would be folly to attempt to disguise the fact that, from a misconception of its provisions, much of the bitterness of feeling that has been manifested by the North towards the South, arose from the passage and subsequent execution of the Fugitive Slave Law. The repeal of the Missouri Compromise increased it, notwithstanding many of our people were favorable to the principle of popular sovereignty. Yet this feeling was rapidly subsiding when the decision of the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott case was announced, which seemed to imbitter the minds of the northern people the more, because they were taught to believe that some of the most important questions decided were preeminently

political in their character, and not properly before the court for adjudication. This was quickly followed by the Lecompton measure, which gave the greatest intensity to the excitement. These, I believe, are the chief causes of the hostility entertained, and too often exhibited by portions of the North, towards the South.

On the other hand, the South have felt deeply aggrieved at the prospect of being excluded, with their peculiar property, from the territory which was obtained from Mexico. They contend that it was acquired by the common sacrifice and efforts of all the States, towards which the South contributed far more of men than their full share; that the Federal government has no power to extend or restrict slavery—no more than to establish or abolish it; that it has no right to distinguish between the domestic institutions of one State or section and another, in order to favor the one and discourage the other. They also complain of the obstacles thrown in the way of the prompt and efficient execution of the fugitive slave law, and that the fugitive is not only harbored and protected, but afforded the means of escape by northern people.

Although the abolitionists, contrary to the spirit of the constitution, had attacked the institution of slavery in the States, long before the raid of John Brown on Harper's Ferry, yet the southern people did not believe that their doctrines had taken firm hold of the northern mind, until that event occurred. The manner in which it was treated by some portions of the North, could have no other than an exasperating effect upon the southern mind. Some even justified his violence, bloodshed and treason, and held him up as a martyr in the cause of human liberty, while others made the action of the surprised and unprotected citizens of Harper's Ferry the theme of reproach and ridicule. Sober reflection has since taught all the baseness and atrocity of the act, and to abhor the principal actor as a dangerous and desperate felon.

Before this could be understood and have its proper effect, however, the South was again alarmed by the bold enunciation of the doctrine of the "irrepressible conflict"—"that all the States must be free or all slave." Whatever may have been the intention of those who originated it, there can be no doubt of the meaning honestly attached to it by the southern people. I am persuaded, a large portion of the republican party never imagined that such an inter-

pretation would have been seriously given to these expressions,—and did not intend, if they obtained the power, to prostitute it to such purpose. The masses were too much engaged and excited to reflect gravely upon the subject, their primary object being to triumph over their opponents. Nevertheless, a fair construction of the language will lead to no other conclusion than that deduced by the southern people, as it obviously relates to the States, and cannot properly be applied to the Territories.

This doctrine excited the people of the southern States to such a degree, that they cannot believe it is not the fixed policy of the North to extinguish slavery in the States. It must be acknowledged that the language in which it was announced was unfortunate, and that the interpretation given to it may lead to frightful consequences. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt of the loyalty of the people of the North to the constitution, and of their willingness to discharge, with fidelity, all their obligations under it. With the exception of the abolitionists, there is really no hostility in the northern States to slavery, as it exists in the southern States. A large majority of our people consider it a domestic institution, with which they have no more concern than if it was in a foreign nation, and that it appropriately belongs to the States sustaining it to manage it as they please. They know they have not the right to interfere with it, directly or indirectly, and whenever the opportunity presents itself, they will honestly and cheerfully proclaim that they have no disposition to interfere with it. If any further constitutional guarantee on this point is required to give quiet and repose, I have no doubt it will be granted.

There are those among us, but their number is small, who are in favor of destroying the relation existing between the free and servile races of the South; but emancipation in the West India Islands is of too recent date, and the evils resulting from it too obvious and too well authenticated, to encourage any such scheme among us. It was commenced there under the most favorable auspices. Sufficient time has elapsed to test its efficacy and develop its fruits. The result has been a great deficiency of labor, notwithstanding the population is numerous, the importation of coolies large, and many captives from African slavers have been

taken there as apprentices. From the highest state of prosperity these islands have been reduced to comparative barbarism.

The principal question connected with this subject that now agitates the people of the North, relates to the Territories. In regard to this the tone of feeling has been rapidly and radically changing, since the attention of the public has been aroused to its consideration.

All well informed men, who have reflected upon it, believe that slavery cannot be taken to and retained permanently in any Territory now belonging to the country. Either the climate or productions forbid it; and there is too much uncultivated land, suitable for slave labor, in the southern States, far superior to any in the Territories, to permit the withdrawal from such States of any large number of slaves, the demand being much greater than the supply. Moreover, the North has more than double the white population of the South—a population noted for their restlessness, and by their pursuits so well adapted to emigration as to leave no doubt that in the nature of things they would far outnumber the southern people in those Territories which invite free labor. Besides this, if we take into consideration the non-slaveholding population of the slave States, and the foreign immigration, we will be satisfied that, without any Territorial restriction, our advantages are very great.

The plan of submitting all questions involving domestic institutions to the settlers of the Territory, might, under ordinary circumstances, be satisfactory. Our experience teaches that they would not meddle with this question; they are always desirous of increasing their population and property. But by what means could they be protected against mischievous intruders?

In view of the peril which threatens the existence of the nation, I deem it the duty of all citizens to rise above mere party considerations, and to sacrifice mere pride of opinion to the welfare of the country. The alternatives are, the relinquishment of an abstract theory of Territorial dependence or independence—of a principle applying to the transitory condition of a Territorial government; or the overthrow of the Union. Of the many propositions presented I can therefore conceive of no safer solution of the difficulty than the entire withdrawal of the apple of discord



from the general and local governments, until the people of the Territory shall form and adopt a State constitution, preparatory to admission into the Union. I believe every western man's experience will convince him that to this proposition, notwithstanding the bitter discussion that has been had upon the subject, the people of a Territory, if let alone, would give a hearty approval. This plan could be adopted by Congress, and would serve to allay the present excitement until the principle could be guaranteed by an amendment of the Constitution. It possesses this advantage over the extension of the Missouri Compromise line, or any other division line, that it effects the same purpose, does not conflict with the decisions of the Supreme Court, and would not subject its friends to the attack of the fanatic and demagogue, who would denounce any line that might be defined as the Black Line, and perhaps prevent many of our people from properly understanding its true object. The actual design would be the same in both cases.

It will be long before any new territory will be acquired, except, perhaps, Mexico. That is one of the finest and most inviting countries in the world; and, as it cannot long exist in its present degraded and revolutionary condition, it may present the grave question, whether we will take it or permit it to fall into the hands of one of the great powers of Europe. If acquired by us it will probably be by treaty; but however done, it must be the joint work of the North and the South, either being able to defeat further acquisition. In any event, it will be for the whole nation to say whether, under the circumstances, it would forego the acquisition on account of this principle.

The Fugitive Slave Law, which has been so much misunderstood and misrepresented, may be modified so as to meet the objections urged against it, and at the same time be made far more efficient. It is difficult to overcome the prejudices excited by the denunciations heaped upon it. It seems to me if it was so amended as to require the examination to be had before the United States Judge of the district in which the fugitive may be arrested, and if he claims to be free, and the Judge remands him, he shall have a fair and impartial jury trial in the State to which he is returned, the people of the North would be satisfied.

The machinery of the law could be very easily adapted to secure to the fugitive all his rights there. It is well understood that the southern courts are favorable to the slave in trials for his freedom. So pre-eminently true is this, that during all the passion and crimination growing out of the slavery difficulty, no one has charged these courts with oppression or partiality in cases of this nature. Their liberal and enlightened judgments in this respect have elicited the unqualified admiration of all our jurists.

It is painful to hear some of our people flippantly say, "Let the southern States go; they cannot live without us, and will be glad to return—it is folly to think of compromising with them." Surely such are not aware that the southern States possess, within themselves, all the material elements of a great nation. Their climate, soil, and diversified productions show this. They have a large foreign and domestic commerce, and vast mineral resources. Their agricultural and manufacturing capacities are unlimited. To all this add their valuable and peculiar staples, and consider how closely the institution of slavery will bind them together, and the conclusion is irresistible that, unmolested, a Southern Confederacy would make a great and powerful nation.

If some suitable adjustment be not speedily effected, all the cotton States will secede, and soon draw after them the border slave States. The general government will probably endeavor to collect duties at all the southern ports, from Wilmington in Delaware, to Wheeling in Virginia, and to enforce its revenue and commercial laws and regulations. This will require an extraordinary increase of the navy, and the incidental expenses will be enormous. If any opposition is made by these States, and coercion should be resorted to, what will follow? I am aware the opinion prevails, to some extent, that the North could easily subdue the South by force of arms, but it is a great mistake. The white population of the northern States exceeds eighteen millions; that of the southern States eight millions,—more than two to one it is true,—but we must take into consideration that we would be compelled to act on the offensive, and their policy would be in a great measure defensive, which would give them a positive advantage. The southern people are distinguished for their frankness, generosity and hospitality; at the same time, they are a brave,

gallant, and patriotic people, to which all our old residents will testify so long as the history of the battles of the River Raisin and the Thames is fresh in their recollections. Moreover, they may obtain aid from abroad. It is a grave error to suppose that, notwithstanding the facilities for free trade and other advantages that may be tendered, the nations of Europe will not recognize a Southern Confederacy because of the institution of slavery. We should recollect that they are generally governed by their political and material interests. And will not the prospect of the failure of the republican experiment, as it is termed, be hailed by them with delight; and may we not rest assured that any chance of stimulating our downfall would be seized by them with eagerness? Nothing can be conceived, in my opinion, which will to a greater extent aid absolutism—the favorite doctrine of most of the sovereigns of Europe.

But suppose the North triumphant, our success would in all probability result in our own destruction. Such was the opinion of General Jackson, from whose farewell address I quote: “If (says he) such a struggle is once begun, and the citizens of one section of the country arrayed in arms against those of another, in doubtful conflict, let the battle result as it may, there will be an end of the Union, and with it an end of the hopes of freedom. The victory of the injured would not secure to them the blessings of liberty; it would avenge their wrongs, but they would themselves share in the common ruin.”

Suppose, on the other hand, the southern States were permitted to secede peaceably, and a Southern Confederation was formed, are we certain there would then be only the two governments, and that the North could retain all the free States? Where would the States on the Pacific go? What of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Indiana and Illinois, (the southern portion of the two last being peopled principally by the South)? Would they attach themselves to a Northern Confederacy, when so many substantial inducements could be proffered them to connect their fortunes with the southern States? Upon the hypothesis that there would be only two confederacies, the one composed of the free, and the other of the slave States, what treaty of amity and concord could be formed between them? Would the South enter

into any bond of fellowship with us, unless as a preliminary we would bind ourselves to respect their peculiar property, to promptly deliver up all fugitive slaves, or make ample compensation for them, and to prevent our citizens from carrying on a continual and vexatious warfare upon their domestic institutions? The South could not in honor demand less, and under the circumstances that would then exist, would the North grant it? The result would engender bitter feeling; strife and difficulty would prevail constantly along the entire border, inevitably ending in war of the most destructive character.

Our business relations with the South, amounting in value to more than five hundred millions of dollars annually, would, to a great extent, be destroyed. We already feel, in this State, the blighting effects of the crisis. Our people have lost millions by reduction in the price of their staple commodities, consequent upon it. But all this is preparatory—the mere prelude to the terrible event. What shall be our condition when it is consummated? Trade must seek new channels; capital involved in the old will be unable to extricate itself. Public works, the result of years of enlightened enterprise and industry, will be rendered useless. We shall, in fact, be a dismembered body. The arteries of our commerce will be rudely torn asunder, thenceforth never to perform their functions of strength and prosperity to the country. Yet the evils will not end in material ruin only. When we rise to the higher positions of morals, religion, and true statesmanship, the spectacle becomes appalling. Morality and religion will be swept away in the tides of license and brutality which follow civil commotion. The Republic will be cast from her pre-eminence in the family of nations. No free government would be permanent; none would be strong for protection or defence; and the whole country, torn and distracted by factions, would certainly be reduced to the disgraceful condition of the Spanish American States.

Under such circumstances, when our institutions, which have commanded the respect and admiration of the world, are in imminent danger, should anything be left undone which would tend to arrest the progress of the revolution already begun? Public sentiment can be reached, and I am satisfied if any rational solution

of the difficulty was presented to the country, it would be cheerfully adopted.

My faith is in the good sense and patriotism of the American people. They should be aroused, and the questions at issue should, by some means, be committed to their disposal, so that their sober determinations may be had in such manner as to be unmistakable.

If Congress will not act, let the Legislatures of the several States initiate proceedings under the constitution. And as no amendments proposed by a National convention are valid, unless ratified by the Legislatures of three-fourths of the several States, or by conventions in three-fourths thereof, no fair minded man can object to this mode of procedure to attain so important an object.

The conservative men of the South are making constant appeals to our magnanimity and patriotism, and thus far we have been not only regardless of their entreaties, but have furnished arguments against, and thus rendered them powerless. Are the peace and prosperity of the country of no consequence to us? Will we give the South a respectful hearing, or treat their complaints with scorn and contempt? Remembering that our very existence as a free people, and the cause of liberty throughout the world, are at stake, we should place ourselves in the right, treating our fellow countrymen as brothers, doing everything in our power to restore peace and love for one another among our citizens, making every reasonable concession; and then if civil war with all its calamities befalls us, we shall, at least, have the consolation of knowing that we have discharged our duties as good citizens with fidelity.

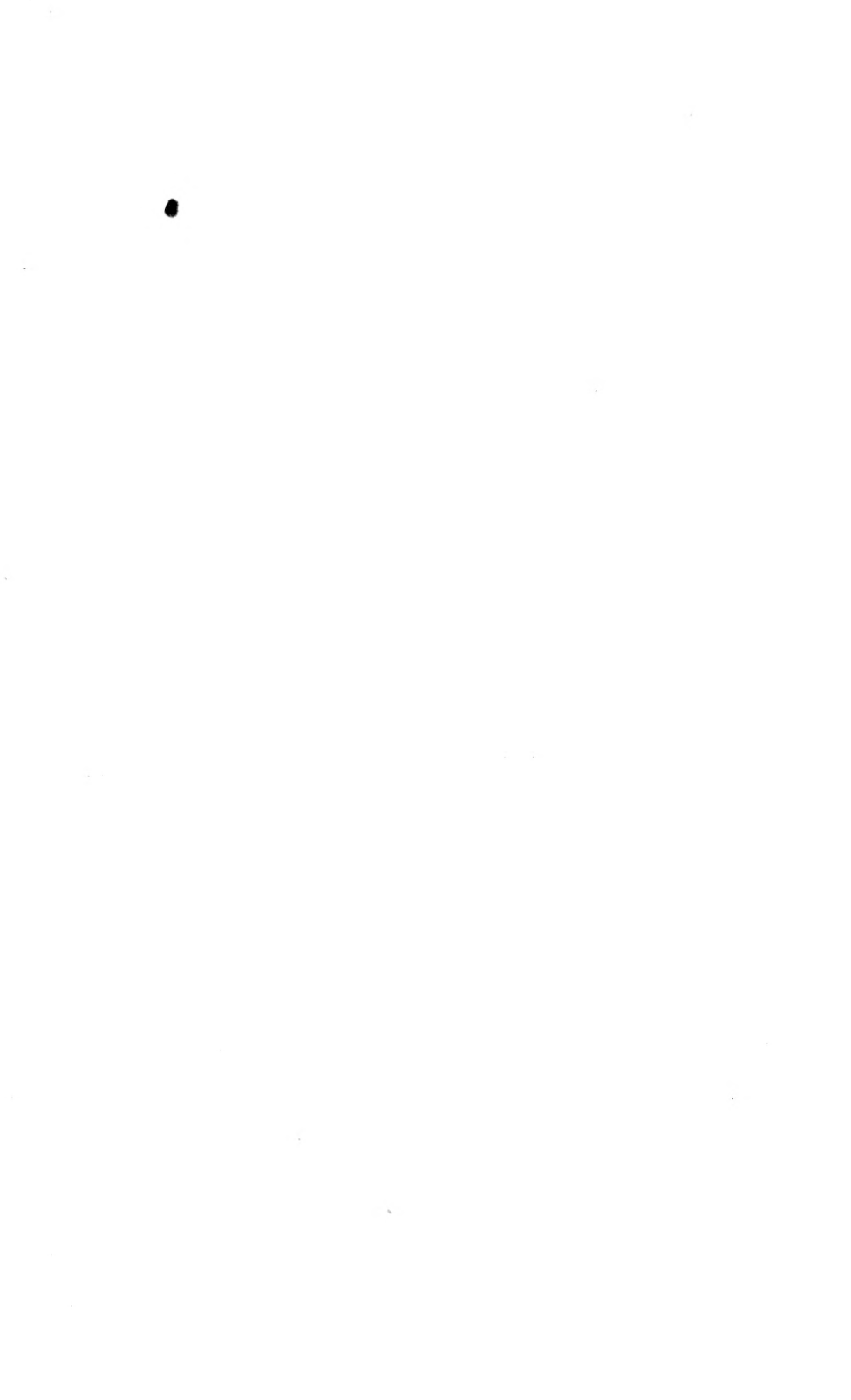
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Your obt't servant,

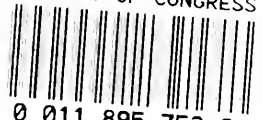
R. McCLELLAND.

Messrs. SANGER, BUHL, and others.





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